BLACK STUDENTS’ SOCIETY

GREEN TEMPLETON COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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Photography by Black Students’ Society
Dear Readers,

In the Black Student Society, we strive to engage in honest and open dialogue and create a space where we can – with others- celebrate our diversity, uniqueness, unity, and the fact that we are different yet equal. As the Society enters its fourth year since its foundation in 2020, we acknowledge the importance of sharing the untold stories of our members who have contributed to our community, the college and Oxford. We hope that by passing the candle, we make their voices heard and that the new generations of Black students can find a home to belong to, thrive and grow. Hence, with immense pride and enthusiasm, we present the inaugural issue of our Black Students Society journal, illuminating the multifaceted essence of our Society and addressing several vital themes.

Firstly, we accompany you on a journey into the origins and mission of our Society, tracing its growth and progress. We then explore the importance of valuing blackness and advocating for acknowledging and celebrating our unique identities. Additionally, we proudly showcase an accomplished alumnus who has secured a position with the United Nations, serving as a source of inspiration for our current members.

Our diverse community members' personal experiences, stories and narratives add depth and authenticity to our pages. We conclude with three articles that examine the critical role of leadership and how it fosters engagement with our wider community.
We extend our heartfelt appreciation to Green Templeton College for their invaluable financial and moral support, making this journal possible.

Special thanks are due to our exceptional editorial team—Gloria, Taiwo, and Islam—for their unwavering dedication to bringing these voices to life.

We hope this journal resonates with you in the spirit of unity, celebration, and empowerment that can inspire meaningful conversations and foster a deeper sense of community.

Sincerely,

MARWA M.A. ELBASHEER

BLACK STUDENTS’ SOCIETY JOURNAL

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
The Genesis
After the death of George Floyd, there was a global awakening of the meaning of racial diversity, equality and inclusion. While many verbalised their commitment, only a few backed words with action. I wanted to be part of the few to make a meaningful difference.

And so when our former Principal, Denise Lievesley, reached out to members of the community to ask how the College could be more diverse and better support Black people, I jumped at the opportunity.

I saw it as a means to give back to society, celebrate the beauty of diversity and togetherness, showcase the uniqueness of Black, and show respect for the culture that hosted us as international students.

What is Black? Who is Black? Is it synonymous with Africa? Well, I won’t answer that yet.

How could I make a difference?
One idea that stood out so strongly for me was a sense of belonging. I recall how I have felt very safe as an international student and an expatriate in my work abroad and the warmth of great friendships I had enjoyed from other cultures. Unfortunately, this hasn’t been the story of many Black students/people living outside the home.

People had confided in a few friends of the challenges they face at Oxford when away from home. So I thought, just maybe if we could come together, we could provide a safe space for people who identify as Black to discuss matters of concern to us.

I felt that creating a home away from home and the environment for others to thrive would be in order. And I had many other ambitious ideas. I couldn’t do it all alone, which is why we needed a recognised Black Students Society (BSS).

After months of coming together as a Black students’ community at GTC (since June 2020), the society was formally birthed in October 2021 at the climax of the Black History Month Celebration by our current Principal, Sir Michael Dixon.

I celebrate the friends who supported this idea and worked tirelessly with me to make it a reality: Acheampong Atta Boateng, Gloria Ngaiza and all 2020/2021 committee members.
Monthly Black Students’ Social, Photography by Black Students’ Society

Freshers’ Fair 2022, Photography by Black Students’ Society
“Today, the BSS boasts of a membership of about 80 students and alumni who have completed GTC since 2021, when the group was created.”

The BLM Taskforce members Neo Tapela, Susan James Relly, Kelly-Ann Fonderson, Lauren Rudd, Nick Parrott, Daniel Cooper, Leenah Abuelgasim, Kojo Botsio, the Senior Tutor, Alison Stenton, the librarians, Porters Lodge, Accommodation unit, Housing indeed the many college staff who supported the many initiatives we have implemented to date.

Today, the BSS boasts of a membership of about 80 students and alumni who have completed GTC since 2021, when the group was created.

We have monthly welfare meetings where we meet in person and/or online to recharge as a family. We also have the BSS Ally Group, where we collaborate with our friends who don’t identify as Black but are interested in Black culture and want to support efforts to improve racial diversity at College.

Our contribution to GTC, Oxford and the World. One of the aims of the BSS is to celebrate the uniqueness of the Black community, our culture and our respect for other cultures. In giving back to our College and community, we have organised diversity dinners and cultural events to spice out life at College.

During the pandemic, we organised a By the Fire Side story-telling event that attracted the famous George the Poet. Although on lockdown, we found smart ways to reach our student community. With the immense support of GTC and the hospitality team, we held a black-themed movie night where students were served with the support of the College with movie kits of snacks and goodies to all GTC households.

The annual college diversity dinner in 2022 showcased our culture through food from different Black communities- from Africa, the Americas, the Middle East, Asia and the UK. We had a welfare painting session where we sent wellness packs to students and held a virtual meeting. These events helped us pull through the pandemic as one GTC community.

Some of the flagship initiatives we have worked on in these past three years include the Maarifa Library collection, which celebrates Black writers, professionals and culture; the Black Mentorship programme, where BSS members are matched to established Black professionals to encourage meaningful exchanges, especially as bears on racial challenges and to support them thrive in their careers.

Through the DifferentEqual Campaign, we have embarked on physical campaigns such as the Lanyards and hoisting of the DifferentEqual Flag at College through October to continue raising awareness about Black lives and our contribution to GTC, Oxford and the world.

As BSS, we have been intentional about impacting our community, raising the banner of GTC and making it an enviable college at Oxford. We have members in key leadership positions at College and Oxford SU.

We have represented the College in competitive sports at the Uni (the Blues).
Since the inception of BSS, we have won prestigious awards such as the Nautilus Awards, Oxford SU Race Equality Award for two years in a row, and the PhD student of the Year Award, UK, to name a few.

Our BSS alumni base is positively impacting the private and public sectors where they work, including in the UN.

We set up a mentorship programme which has enriched the career development of our members, including increasing prospects and job opportunities. We have organised the annual Black History Month, with the third edition coming up this October. These events are opportunities to be conscious about improving racial and all forms of diversity within our community and globally.

Our next ambitions

We want to continue giving back to our College and Oxford community and positively impacting our world. We have an educational outreach planned to a secondary school in Oxford to provide mentoring support to students. We want to increase the mentoring opportunities (under the Black Mentorship Programme) to include more students at College and Oxford.

We shall work on our membership drive to bring more Black alumni who completed College before BSS was birthed.
There is no time to waste. We must either unite now or perish.

Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922 –1999)
The First President of Tanzania
“Countrymen, the task ahead is great indeed, and heavy is the responsibility; and yet it is a noble and glorious challenge – a challenge which calls for the courage to dream, the courage to believe, the courage to dare, the courage to achieve – to achieve the highest excellencies and the fullest greatness of man.”

Kwame Nkrumah (1909 –1972)
The First President of Ghana

"Am I black or African?"

"I was the only black student in my previous college."

These refrains echo through the ancient halls of Oxford, whispered by black students grappling with questions about identity. The dreamlike spires of this historic city offer a promising new beginning, but for many black students, it is a journey full of uncertainty. They carry the weight of a past where they were already a minority, and Oxford merely extends that realisation.

Yet, here, the stakes are different, the atmosphere more challenging, and a perpetual sense of imposter syndrome killing their confidence. They find themselves fighting battles against racism and for equal opportunities, even after achieving academic excellence.

For some black students, particularly those hailing from African countries, this marks their first encounter with the concept of "the minority" or the need to identify themselves by their race. It is their first journey into the understanding that society can pass judgments based on appearances alone. I worried about many things in Tanzania, my birthplace, but my race was not among them. My heart was serene, my life boundless; racial boundaries were foreign. In addition to these challenges, there is an added pressure to grapple with a foreign culture, an unfamiliar climate, and the relentless demands of academia.

Recognising these struggles, the Black Student Society (BSS) at Green Templeton College comes in. It welcomes students from diverse backgrounds to gather and embrace their rich tapestry of experiences. It provides a platform to voice their ideas, find solace in shared struggles, and kindle the flames of empowerment.

Here, they can forge a collective strength that will see them through their time at Oxford and prepare them for all the journeys that lie beyond.

Despite being in its infancy, BSS, in the academic year 2023, embarked on a remarkable journey of social, educational, and charitable endeavours:

Social Harmony:

The society orchestrated a symphony of social events, from leisurely punting on tranquil waters to cosy movie nights and monthly lunches.
These gatherings allowed black students to forge connections, share their narratives, and build enduring friendships.

Intellectual Awakening:

Under the banner of "Uncomfortable Oxford," the society dared to initiate critical dialogues about race, privilege, and class. It was a tour aimed at enlightening society members and other students at the college about Oxford University's uncomfortable history that shapes our experiences today.

In addition, a student mentorship programme paired seasoned black professionals with ambitious students, guiding them toward shared career paths. This mentorship was instrumental in nurturing black students' academic success and personal growth.

Acts of Compassion:

The society exhibited unwavering global solidarity, extending its embrace to the corners of the world where its members hailed from. A heart-warming bake sale raised over £600 to support humanitarian efforts in Sudan, showcasing the society's immense compassion and collective strength.
Engagement with Influence:

Understanding the vital role of actively participating in college affairs, the society's leadership took an active seat in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) meetings. Our presence ensured that black students' concerns and experiences were acknowledged and acted upon in college policies and decision-making processes. We also partnered with the University Counselling Service to encourage mental health services-seeking behaviour among our society members.

Leadership Shines:

Our society members entered various roles within the 2022/2023 college students' government (Graduate Common Room). Marwa Elbasheer and Gloria Ngaiza served as the Black Students Co-Representatives, Adebisi Adenipekun as the Development Officer, and Tracy Serebour as the International Student Representative.

Honouring Legacy:

Black History Month celebrations punctuated the calendar this year. With a series of events and activities, we educate, entertain, and celebrate black history and culture. The month starts with an academic talk featuring renowned scholars to catalyse dialogue and profound reflection on black individuals' historical and contemporary experiences.

An unforgettable Afro-Caribbean Bar Night aims to become a vibrant tapestry of unity and celebration by bringing students from diverse backgrounds together and offering a taste of the rich Afro-Caribbean culture through music and dance.

In closing, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the college administration for their unwavering support of our society's activities. Together, we are writing a new chapter of empowerment, unity, and boundless possibilities for black students at Green Templeton College, Oxford and beyond.

Movie night, Photography by Black Students’ Society
Green Templeton College, Photography by Marwa Elbasheer
Double consciousness.

In 1903, W.E.B Du Bois coined a term that would capture the most central identity crisis of an entire ethnicity – perhaps for the remainder of human history. According to Du Bois, to be African American is to exist as a pendulum, swinging back and forth between the commitment to unapologetic Black identity and the pressures to conform to the dominant white society – not necessarily for its allure, but for its adjacency to privilege, comfort, belonging, survival. But is my survival as a Black person really survival at all if I must the ways that I openly celebrate and embody my culture? Is that even the sort of existence that I want?

As I navigate starkly white spaces – the University of Oxford being no exception – will I have to slough off the heaviest, most essential aspects of my Blackness under the immense weight and pressure of double consciousness?

Thanks to Alain, I don’t bear the full burden of answering these questions.

Alain Locke formed the philosophical backbone of the Harlem Renaissance, an era of creative and intellectual flourishing that served as a beacon for African Americans amidst the throes of Jim Crow oppression. Before this age of Black enlightenment, though, Alain Locke was a Rhodes Scholar. Though it is suspected that a few members of the 1907 Selection Committee knew that Locke was African American, he was systematically denied entry to several Oxford Colleges and student events. He was eventually granted admission to Hertford College, but his standing as a second-class citizen in England – as was the case his entire life in the States – was already cemented through words and actions as cold as an Oxford rainstorm in February.

Once again, Locke found himself standing in the agonizingly grey space between Black thought leadership and the Anglo-Saxon superiority complex woven into the very fabric of Oxford. And even in the face of his
unambiguous Blackness, he had a complicated (but undeniable) relationship with privilege. He was, after all, an American Rhodes Scholar, and holding either identity in many parts of the world allowed him access to spaces from which countless people are routinely denied entry.

Alain Locke was contradiction personified: opportunity encased in oppression, oppression encased in opportunity, on two separate continents. In this respect, Alain did not experience double consciousness as defined by his contemporary Du Bois. Each day he spent in Oxford, he waded through layers upon layers of consciousness. He contained multitudes; he was a man with many souls.

Such is the lot of African American Rhodes Scholars today, me included, more than a century later. But if Alain was capable of honouring every aspect of his identity – incorporating each layer of his consciousness into scholarship that shaped the ongoing movement towards Black liberation – then I can certainly do the same.
“But if Alain was capable of honouring every aspect of his identity – incorporating each layer of his consciousness into scholarship that shaped the ongoing movement towards Black liberation – then I can certainly do the same.”

There are still times when I feel that my place in the Black Diaspora is underrepresented or misunderstood in Oxford. And there are still moments when I must sit uncomfortably with the internal tension caused by my dual feelings of marginalization and easiness in a multinational environment that admires my Americanness while dismissing my Blackness, despite the fact that I did not choose or “earn” either of these identities for myself.

But beyond the horizon of these snapshots of self-doubt lies an opportunity to transform the knowledge I’m gaining at Oxford into a body of meaningful work that is made in the image of my community. While my scholarship and advocacy may not incite a generation-defining renaissance, I can assure you that it will be painted in the bright hues of Blackness, casting light on the liminal spaces where African Americans often find ourselves in a world that does not always make room for us. And with each brushstroke – with each story that I write, share, and receive throughout my life’s work – I will reaffirm my vision for a world that is more equipped to cherish and protect the bodies, minds, and many, many souls of African Americans and Black people across the entire Diaspora. Alain would have it no other way.
Of Afro-Pop & Jollof, Baobab Trees & Spires

“Together, we bear witness to common threads of treatment globally.”
Sauntering past Exeter’s Cohen Quadrangle, a pair of black British Oxonians was jamming to another Afro-pop banger, blaring from a hand-held speaker.

Their perky, buoyant steps goaded along by the beat and bass that typify Africa’s largest cultural export. The urban English man (call him Kwame) remarked to his companion (She was Aisha) that though he did not understand a word of the lyrics, the song just “satisfied his soul” and “excited his essence” in a manner beyond belief.

“Why such soaring superlatives”, Aisha remarked even as she beamed a radiant, porcelain-white smile that betrayed her agreement, ”But yeah, I can't lie, this song is great”. She concluded in classic London lingo.

I, the West African, walked behind the pair, making my way to Green Templeton—Mélange of Ghana and Nija Jollof (that debate na false dichotomy oooo). Equally lost in the Afro-pop vortex, I pondered the moment’s significance.

The power of art to remind a people separated and scattered by the violence of history that they are, after all, one people with a common destiny and unite them for the common cause of Pan-Africanism:
“All Africans, native or Diasporan, are seen, to a degree, through the continental Africa prism.”

Worldwide Solidarity among all persons of African ancestry, indigenous or Diasporan. A global movement where every “African” is valued and protected by the actualisation of Ubuntu - “I am because we are”.

Over Oxford formal dinners or other soirees, I engaged a spectral cast of dynamic minds on the current relevance of Pan-Africanism, if any. Different streaks emerged:

First, there is the African “Global Citizen” – typically born and bred on the continent, now hankering for a future that defies any limitation occasioned by those very roots regarding travel, multinational job opportunities, etc.

Second, there is the De-Africanised, African – likely born and bred in the diaspora, who just wants to be left to be, without constantly being anchored to or tagged with the burden of where they “really” come from.

Then there is the Afrocentric African – the fervent Pan-Africanist for whom it is imperative that Africa evolves her own cognitive empire, an entirely disparate manner and means of living conceived exclusively for African welfare!

In Oxford, parallels of these views can be said to find residence in student societies. A one-time Presidential candidate for AfriSoc (Oxford’s student-run Africa Society) noted that there was little engagement with a sister organisation, the African Caribbean Society (ACS).

Afrisoc is composed mainly of continental postgraduates, while ACS, on the other hand, is a gathering of Diasporan, UK, and USA undergraduates plus postgraduates. This probably was a fair point. It must have been his own cry for modern Pan-Africanism.

All these perspectives to me are valid, for we all have varied lived experiences, so too will outlooks differ. Even so, there remains a persistent theme that affects, even afflicts, disparate outlooks. All Africans, native or Diasporan, are seen, to a degree, through the continental Africa prism.

Together, we bear witness to common threads of treatment globally. Africa’s massive Baobab tree shadow follows us universally through time and space. It is an inescapable influence, THE indelible tattoo!
“I look forward to the day when we all, Continental and Diasporan, gather as a family around the flame of unity under the Baobab tree that is Africa.”

Oprah Winfrey was denied access to a posh designer bag in a Swiss shop. Of course, being black, she could not possibly afford it!

Chris Kaba, 24, a black British man, was shot through the head in a car by London police in September 2022.

How’s this for a spooky parallel? Across the pond, Ta’Kiya Young, 21, a pregnant mother of two, was also shot in a car by Ohio police.

Assuming Chris and Ta’Kiya were convicted criminals, would they have been sentenced to execution by shooting? Black lives matter?

I then should be grateful for my life, I suppose, after being accosted by security at an Oxford department store and quizzed about a “suspicious” jacket I had owned for years.

Clearly, whether lofty or lowly, Oprah or Ta’Kiya, Oxonian or not, all Africans, Diasporan and native, remain vulnerable.

In the hallowed halls of Oxford, the strength of bonds we forge, the expanse of consciousness nurtured, and the depth of responsibility we take for our holistic community determine how we achieve justice in the face of that social exposure awaiting us all.

Hence the continuing relevance of Pan-Africanism. Oxford is an excellent place to build that critical consciousness. Accurate knowledge of African history, philosophy, and sociology to help shape a transcendent future. I came as a medic to study International Health; I got so much more.

Cardinal, amongst which is that being global, de-africanised, or indigenous does not necessarily mean being decolonised. And which animal is decolonisation anyway? Is it the reclamation of ancestral lands? Liberation of intellectual real estate or both? So, the journey of Independent critical thought begins – leading inevitably to the realisation that the continual pursuit of Pan-Africanism is urgent for current social and historical justice to be attained. These are weighty matters that can leave some bored and others despondent. So, it is refreshing to find joy and levity in the experience of Kwame and Aisha. Heavy thoughts are given accessible expression in a pop tune. Where public policy has lagged, art is leading.

This city of dreaming spires has the fire of magnificent minds with which to forge a relevant, purposeful unity. I look forward to the day when we all, Continental and Diasporan, gather as a family around the flame of unity under the Baobab tree that is Africa. Our Hearts and minds resonate to the beats of our most exquisite artists. That we would fashion a real global community of justice and excellence.

In the interlude, hold aloft your calabash filled with “umqombothi.” let us say cheers to the wordsmiths of the land, be it their song, prose or poetry that soar our souls!
Working for the United Nations

An interview with Kelly-Ann to learn about her current role in Geneva.

1. When and what did you study at Oxford?
I read the MPhil in Development Studies at Green Templeton College. I matriculated in 2019 and completed my MPhil in 2021.

2. What job are you currently doing, and what is your role?
I am a United Nations Junior Professional Officer at the headquarters office of a UN agency. My Unit focuses on protection from and response towards sexual misconduct. In my Unit, we contribute towards policies, campaigns and programmes that protect vulnerable populations from sexual abuse by aid workers and respond to sexual misconduct with a victim-centred approach.

3. How did you secure the job?
My journey to getting this job was unconventional. I was working full-time in Oxford when an HR staff member of the UN’s JPO programme for Dutch candidates contacted me on LinkedIn. They noticed my profile and encouraged me to apply for two positions. I waited for vacancies which suited my location, language and subject interests and submitted three meticulously tailored applications in June 2022. After being shortlisted for one position, I completed two timed assessments online. I prepared by reading every policy and publication I could find on the topic of my agency and other UN agencies. I also reached out to previous JPOs on LinkedIn.
That summer, I took annual leave from my full-time job in Oxford to teach economics foundations in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. While teaching at Princess Nourah University, I was invited to interview for the UN agency. It was stressful because the internet connection wasn’t stable, and I still had to prepare lessons. Two weeks later, I got the job offer while packing my bags to head to the airport! I was ecstatic and in shock.

4. Which skills and experience helped you in getting the job? Did your time at Oxford contribute?

The TuWezeshe Akina Dada fellowship sponsored by Forward UK was an invaluable experience for me. I was a 2019/20 TuWezeshe fellow and was trained in feminist theory and advocacy against gender-based violence with a specific focus on FGM. My fellowship focused on sexual violence towards women and girls of African descent in the UK. My current role intersects with gender-based violence, and we work with migrant communities. My organisation is highly projectised, so understanding project budgets and setting clear programming objectives are valuable skills I still use, which I learned through my fellowship.

Studying Development Studies - a highly interdisciplinary course- encourages critical thinking through economic, anthropological and political lenses. These disciplines inform my understanding of violence, power dynamics and how institutions are shaped.

5. What advice do you have for black Oxford students who want to work in international development?

There are many ways to be engaged in development work, from finance, academic research, international organisations, government and NGOs. If possible, get field experience, even if that means volunteering and doing fellowships or internships. Seek mentorship. Connect with alumni groups, students, and university staff with experience you can learn from.

If you are interested in working with the UN, it helps to be multilingual and work towards being proficient in at least two official languages. Put yourself out there, whether that’s by attending networking events and making genuine connections or posting more on LinkedIn.
Ngorongoro National Park, Photography by Gloria K Ngaiza
Navigating dual realities: Studying at Oxford amidst Sudan’s war

Black Students’ Society Fundraising event for Sudan, Photography by Black Students’ Society
I had with my loved ones might be the last. In the beginning, I listened to the news reporting the level of destruction and counting civilian casualties and then stopped; it was too much to bear.

It is hard to explain in wartime that every life matters; those killed are not just numbers; they were lives full of untold stories of love, pain, joy and dreams that have gone forever. They are loved souls of someone still alive and have to endure the agony of loss and being. Talking to my family while hearing the sounds of gunfire and bombing stripped life from everything except the fact that it is too short and death is its most authentic face.

One aspect of being from a country at war is that you start to question your very existence, identity and worth. I heard the stories of my friends and thousands of desperate Sudanese nationals who were forced to flee their country and how they were treated at the borders of neighbouring countries. Then, my visa to the United Arab Emirates got cancelled because the government banned the entry of Sudanese nationals one week before my travel to see my family, who had to leave everything behind to save their lives. At the time, I came to realise that now, my passport defines my worth, how people will treat me and when my human rights could be easily and justifiably denied.

“What is the value of man without a homeland, without a flag, without an address? What is the value of man?”-
Mahmoud Darwish -

I still remember the day I woke up to a call from my sister in Sudan, “A fight has erupted between the army and the rapid support forces; they might cut the telecommunication, so don’t worry, we are fine”, she said. It was the moment at which my world changed forever. Over the following weeks, I watched the news and constantly checked on my family, friends, and colleagues whom I left in Sudan while battling with my fear of silence, unanswered calls, phone ringing and the fact that each call
“It is hard to explain in wartime that every life matters; those killed are not just numbers; they were lives full of untold stories of love, pain, joy and dreams that have gone forever.”

Every Sudanese national becomes a potential refugee, a burden, and that is how you will be treated. I felt homeless without being one.

The painful truth is that life goes on. I wake up every day, and I am here in Oxford doing my DPhil studies and feeling trapped between two realities that do not belong to each other. The reality of my life in Oxford, where people enjoy simple things and have casual conversations about the weather, what they will do during weekends, their exams and where they will submit their next paper.

It was surreal having these conversations with my friends and colleagues while my whole world was crumbling. My country, everything I cherish and hold dear, has been attacked and destroyed. I shifted my career and came here to Oxford with one dream: one day, I will be able to implement large-scale population studies in my country, hoping that it may help create a better life for my people. Now, I have to accept the possibility that it might not be possible during my lifetime and pray it does not become a reality.

As the war enters its sixth month, I am still in Oxford doing my DPhil, grateful that my family and friends are alive and have a roof over their heads and thankful for the tremendous support from my network. Most importantly, I am grateful for the short moments I encounter during my long walks where I feel at peace, and Oxford feels home! It is during these brief moments that life becomes bearable and may be full of hope!
One of my best decisions about studying in Oxford was to come with my family – my wife and four-year-old daughter (who turned five in Oxford). I acknowledge that different people will have different experiences on this topic.

However, in this short piece, I highlighted three main points from my experience and interactions with other couples that can help Graduate Students coming with their family.

The first and probably most significant pain point for families in Oxford is managing the transition and ensuring family stability as fast as possible. The challenge with transition includes obtaining visas (if applicable to you) as quickly as possible. Sometimes, like in my case, visa challenges are beyond applicants’ control, so do your best to keep your Department, College, and the University Immigration Team updated.

Another critical component of family stability is a suitable accommodation for your family. The UK has strict housing policies, and suitable accommodation depends on your family’s size. For me, a two-bedroom apartment from the College (GTC) works well. I recommend that prospective students decide on their accommodation plans early (by May/June) and contact Colleges and Property Agents for their preferences on time.

Closely related to accommodation is childcare or school for your children. My friends with children under four years old either paid for childcare support or had one of the parents stay home to save costs. Childcare in Oxford requires financial planning and time management skills, especially if you come from an African country with a rich community culture of support.
For children older than four, they can get enrolled in school through the Oxfordshire City Council. It is best to initiate this school enrolment process before coming to Oxford.

Having settled the child(ren), agreeing with your spouse on the plan for the year is essential. Although spouses of students can work full-time, carefully consider your school commitments and need for childcare in deciding the suitable roles for your spouse. Families’ options to navigate this include working morning shifts, night shifts, weekends only or working from home, depending on the sector.

Financial stability is another crucial part of coming to Oxford with family. Although many graduate students in Oxford have partial or full scholarships, it is essential to note that they rarely cover the family. This calls for rigorous financial forecasting to avoid financial pressure on you as a student and your family. If you have the capacity, explore positions that can get you additional income within the 20 hours per week of work permitted on the student visa.

Finally, as a Graduate student with a family, I was prepared to go the extra mile to cover my readings and sacrifice some social events to pick up my daughter in school or to be with my family in the evenings/weekends.

These are value judgements that individuals must make, but expect that your routines and experiences in Oxford will be unique to you and your circumstances.
BY TAIWO OLAWOLE
MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY (2022-2023)
SOCIETY COMMITTEE MEMBER (2022-2023)
NIGERIAN

Black writer: personal experience

Photography by Gloria K Ngaiza
Studying in Oxford was many things for me, but as a black woman who relishes in writing, I would say it was particularly astounding. This simply was because I had written the story of Oxford clearly on the pages of my mind, but the reality of living and studying in Oxford was much more than everything I ever imagined.

Although creative writing was not my primary purpose in Oxford, getting the very hankered Master's in Public Policy was my goal, so I may not have had the full experience of a black creative writer; however, in this article, I will share a few things that impacted my writing experience in Oxford.

As an African whose writing is inspired by the cultures I have experienced, the tradition and culture in Oxford were a major highlight for me. Stepping into Oxford was an enchanting realm where time seems to have stood still, and history continues to resonate through its magnificent architecture, traditions, and culture.

Taiwo Olawole
The sights of the magnificent Oxford Architecture are the perfect sites for a wanderlust to creativity. Oxford's architecture is simply a symphony of designs, an opulent collage of elegance, hidden gems, secret gardens, tiny courtyards, and linked channels that leave an African like me gobsmacked at every turn. It was beautiful to see that each building told a unique story in the city's rich chronicles. One of Oxford's most iconic structures is the Radcliffe Cam, which embodies the Bodleian Library. This imposing tower preserves knowledge and wisdom of centuries past, which was, for me, on the one hand, a writer's dream, but also, on the other hand, an intimidating edifice that emulsifies my emotions at almost every visit.

My friend once said there is no Oxford without its history and tradition, and indeed, I totally agree with her. It is the preservation and continuous practice of the tradition that makes Oxford a unique place. I particularly liked the tradition of formal college dinners, matriculations and graduation, which always features the echoes of Latin chants.

Every one of the traditions was a cherished memory I was glad to participate in. Oxford's cultural calendar is also a vibrant medley, from the exuberance of May Mornings with Morris dancers and colourful ribbons to the allure of literary festivals that certainly inspire any writer, including myself.

Without a doubt, Oxford is a place of rigorous academic values and principles and an intense workload, which at first put me under pressures related to stereotypes and biases, leading to feelings of imposter syndrome and the need to constantly prove my abilities. While I did not need to always prove myself as a writer because writing was not my primary assignment in Oxford, there was an invincible pressure to reflect my creativity in my academics. Sadly, I neither had the luxury of time nor the opportunity to explore my creativity, but I have made a promise to be back, just to write.

In the past, Oxford University has been criticized for its lack of diversity; I had imagined that in Oxford, I might visibly represent and be reminded that I am among a minority of students because of my race and ethnic background.

However, Green Templeton College was particularly a place that fostered diversity, equality and inclusivity through its various student-led organizations and initiatives.

The Black Student community was very supportive in this regard. The college also organized several writing workshops that helped me stay connected with writing. This and the array of many other resources provided by the university impacted my experience and perspectives as a passing black writer in Oxford.

In the end, I found that Oxford was not just a school; it was an emotion, an experience, albeit short-lived, that planted its root in my soul. Oxford captivated the reality of my dreams and ignited the writer in me again.
My Six Months at Oxford

“It was my first time experiencing winter, and I got excited at the first sight of snow in real life, though I found it a bit limiting”.

As I look back and recount my journey at Oxford, knowing I utilised every opportunity to tell my own stories, learn as a fellow and share my views with the world has been quite a fulfilling experience.

I successfully conducted an internal seminar on gendered disinformation, which I believe is relevant to most females in the media.

I managed to invite and interview a Zambian, a Komla Dumor award-winning journalist, and I was very intentional about bringing in a black person to promote racial parity.

The Fun Months: First Three Months in Oxford

Being the only African at the beginning of my cohort, the first three months were the most exciting experience.

I enjoyed punting at Cherwell Boathouse as it reminded me of kayaking at Tiffany's Canyon back home in Zambia. Besides private prayer, my favourite activity throughout the six months was karaoke.

My hair always attracted good attention; some fellows mistook my braids for dreadlocks and would compliment me for how long my hair was.

One day, I decided to undo my braids and went to one of our seminars with my natural short, black, kinky hair, and it seemed like it was the first time someone actually saw a black woman's hair in its natural form.

I remember one saying Wow! So "Lupita nyongo-ish", I enjoyed the attention that day, and my supervisor and one other black American encouraged me to wear it like this more often.

This inspired me to write an article on hair to express the struggles that black women often experience with their hair in different places, including Africa.
It was my first time experiencing winter, and I got excited at the first sight of snow in real life, though I found it a bit limiting. During my stay in Oxford, I managed to get accommodation at the North Oxford Overseas Centre; I was happy to be staying here as it has a Christian foundation and is multi-cultural, so I met people from all over the world and had fun together.

The fellowship
The schedule was very flexible, so I had ample time to virtually connect with my son and family back home for long hours. I also had enough time to visit and bond with my family within the UK, especially my nieces and I enjoyed the Green Templeton Black community which was the best decision I made.

In addition, other fellows were generally respectful and accommodating, though a few had misconceptions about Africa as a whole. "Are there banks in Africa? Is there beer and running water?" My affirmative yes to those and many other strange questions I got had many fellows surprised because they only know war-torn, poor, impoverished Africa they get to see in their media.

That is a serious misrepresentation of actual Africa in general. I could not blame them and had no choice but to correct the narrative. I noticed that some Africans living in the diaspora have not done justice to set the records straight in terms of telling real stories.

I felt compelled to restate updated lived scenarios, and I learned so much about other countries worldwide through the experiences that other fellows told me. Their similarities with Zambia made me realise that "some problems are simply people problems and not merely African problems". Friends became family, and we have stayed in touch as we plan group Zoom calls to check-in.

Church
St. Aldates Church became home for me as it was one of the most inclusive churches, and it was my favourite place to be. Overall, the experience was blissful.
University leadership as a sabbatical Officer

Photography by Gloria K Ngaiza
“My role involves advocating for equity, diversity and inclusion across the University.”

The opportunity to contribute to the first magazine spotlighting the rich experiences of Black students at Oxford emerged as a result of my election to the position of Vice-President Liberation and Equality of Oxford University Student Union. I aim to be open and honest about my journey and, in a small way, contribute to a better understanding of Black life at Oxford.

To navigate the landscape of Oxford as a Black student leader is to confront the sweeping backdrop of history and the ongoing struggles against racial inequality. When I accepted my offer to Oxford in 2022, I was deeply afraid. This fear manifested in a multitude of questions, from concerns about the scarce representation of Black and racialized students to the spectre of impostor syndrome and the nagging doubts of my acceptance as an inadvertent mistake.

I became engrossed in the stories of Christian Federick Cole, the first Black student at Oxford in 1873, despite his grandfather's history of enslavement.
I was equally fascinated with the life of Kofoworola Ademola, the first Black African woman to earn a degree at Oxford in 1932.

I also learned about the student movements that historically defined this institution, with the Rhodes Must Fall movement of 2015 and 2016 standing out prominently. These movements called for the removal of the Rhodes statue, and they underscored the resilience of Black African students who have called Oxford their home. The more I immersed myself in these stories, the more I had the courage to confront my own fears.

The tragic death of George Floyd in 2019 weighed upon the racial consciousness of the world. It triggered a seismic shift within educational institutions as they reckoned with the lived experiences of Black students. In my college, Green Templeton, Josephine Agyeman-Duah established one of the first Black student college societies to support Black students.

This community included mentorship programs and a Black History and Anti-Racism library called the Maarifa Collection, which offered valuable resources for those interested in race, history, and the struggle for equality.

These experiences informed my work as Vice-President. This year, I plan to advocate for Oxford colleges to become sanctuaries for refugees and those displaced by war and climate disasters. I will also work towards policies that address the needs of racialized queer communities and organize events that promote diversity and inclusion within the student body.

This, I admit, is no easy task given Oxford’s decentralized structure; however, by leaning into our communities and preserving our values, I believe we can build a more inclusive Oxford—a place to call home where diversity is celebrated and Black students truly feel a sense of belonging.
Kennedy Aliu
“Every good thing begins somewhere, and I am here to inspire you that student leadership, incentivised or not, is ideal for the other why you chose Oxford and Green Templeton College more than you think.”

I am indifferent to campus politics and never entirely understood why people during my undergraduate college days strived earnestly for political roles. For me, the reward did not measure up with the stress load.

Coming from a developing world, I also associate politics with corrupt sycophants who amass wealth via public theft without the intelligence to offer a legacy to their societies. So, student politics couldn’t do the sell. How can I convince an Oxford grad whose most valued resource is time to engage in student leadership?

By my account, one of the vibrant Oxbridge colleges with the highest student engagement and financial independence is our sister college, St Edmund of Cambridge.

The reason is simple. Even with a large undergraduate population, the student community is not micromanaged but competitively and voluntarily led by highly enthusiastic and motivated students who pass on community traditions from cohort to cohort.

The highlight of my tenure was exposing students to what I felt the collegiate community could look like by reviving the GTC-Eddies during early post-pandemic normalcy.

The benefits of the Oxford collegiate education model could be far-reaching but have shifted dramatically through the times only to be experienced by perhaps a handful. Today, students are constantly shopping around for experiences or likely budding at a newfound community elsewhere.

Nonetheless, every good thing begins somewhere, and I’m here to inspire you that student leadership, incentivised or not, is ideal for the other why you chose Oxford and Green Templeton College more than you think.
What if I tell you the essential skills that will probably determine how much more or quicker you climb the career ladder after postgraduate training may have none or least to do with your time investment in the classroom?

Today, educational credentials barely make an entry pass into the socio-economic doorway. Your survival through the ranks may come through how you apply yourself to the situational and circumstantial politics of each passing moment and your respective organization or industry.

Call it a reasonable chance. Before we deliberate on why your obsession with old-fashioned classroom grades matters the least, I’d take a detour first on a perspective meaning of leadership. This is because, after graduate training, most of you will begin careers that will gravitate towards leadership roles.

Leadership at its unit core is about relationships with people. It is less of a social skill and more to do with simply caring about people. The opposite is when the supposed leader ignorantly 'leads themselves', becoming the centre of attention and not the people. This often signals a failure point leadership.
“Anytime I made a case to support students in front of brilliant fellows and administrators in my ridiculous mixed accent, I was learning and practising.”

Just glance through history's sinusoid turns in power politics, from humility to arrogance, the loved advocate to the infamous tyrant, to mention but few. Indeed, it is simply about who or what you lead and putting people first.

What will distinguish a great leader often comes down to their ability to win people's trust. When leadership is more entitled, it becomes about the individual who usually makes it about themselves from a power context, resulting in self-leading without the "people" component. However, where people matter, that's where out-of-classroom learning becomes vital. Here, skills such as persuasion, delegation, and compromise become the tools for your execution.

Now, let's get real. We persuade people to exercise readily unwilling or unintended choices or actions. For instance, winning majority votes in an electoral context requires persuasion more than a long résumé. A persuasive negotiator can earn more than their peers, even for the same job title. Compelling startup founders have raised significant investment rounds on ideas without proof of business concept, revenues, or customer traction.

Meanwhile, as a rule of 90+%, most startups are bound to fail regardless of their groundbreaking innovation or initial market traction. It wasn't your usual success checklist but the simple art of persuasion. In traditional politics, leaders surround themselves with those they trust to execute their vision.

At the college, committee members are elected and independent. You need to figure out how to work with them even if they would not make your ideal 'cabinet'. I find that an exciting challenge that requires unique skills to manage. You must quickly learn and leverage their unique strengths and put them to work through strategic delegations. Delegation is part of team play. No one has it all. This way, you also get stuff done without breaking a neck.

My third highlight is compromise. Sadly, we are conditioned to view life's experiences always in the context of win-lose situations. It takes confidence and strength of mind to let go. It is the high point of Nelson Mandela.
“What will distinguish a great leader often comes down to their ability to win people's trust.”

When something is not worth pursuing, it saves you energy to redirect your focus on more important things and highlights the downside of the competing interest. This validates your unexercised perspective or offers without the execution effort.

Now, be honest with yourself: will you ever have the chance to hone any of the above-outlined leadership traits? Then, ask yourself, if this matters more to your bottom line, will you pay to sharpen them? How about we scale this?

I can confidently say that with practice, you could be making a partner at McKinsey or running an Ivy Institution. For the hard nuts still unconvinced, what if I tell you I got a busy and talented Oxford MBA grad with lucrative options in his first-world home to help me run a full-time high-risk venture in a developing country?

Anytime I made a case to support students in front of brilliant fellows and administrators in my ridiculous mixed accent, I was learning and practising.

My mistakes in the learning did not decrease a stock value or get me fired from my job. I want to see more MBA friends look at college leadership as a test bed for a pseudo-organisation.

For fun, I brag that I could sell out party tickets in less time than Beyonce, haha!

Finally, what would be the low point during my student leadership tenure? Near the end of my term, college student leaders through the SU coordinated and put forward a consolidated issue that was common across the colleges. By coincidence, I had to deal with increasing student engagement and interest in leadership.

Most MCR/GCR Presidents met a key representation of college authorities to present a practical and rational case. After a nice treat, the individual looked us in the face and said, "Yeah, sorry, there's nothing I can do*. I was shuttered in disappointment and refrained from launching counter-persuasion.

This is because, for me, it was more like—yeah, "we* are aware, but we will not do anything about it. The problem, my friends, at this point, is that we were no longer in the presence of a leader but power and entitlement.

To end, I will ask myself, will I do it again? It will be a big NO.

Wouldn't that be contradictory? Again, no, because it was never about the position but the reasons and the circumstances.

Now, I am swamped somewhere working with smallholder farmers in my dirty boots and, hopefully, keeping food baskets less empty come rain or shine.

I hope at least I have convinced you that the best way to advocate and guarantee your interest is always to have a seat on the table. But when you win people's trust to represent them, remember it was never about you but those you lead.
My experience as a Junior Dean

“Green Templeton College (GTC) at Oxford University stands out for its significant representation of black students, making the role of a Junior Dean (JD) a unique and meaningful one.”

As a JD, I provide welfare support alongside other college welfare and support team members, including peer supporters, porters, the Senior Tutor, the Academic Registrar, and the Dean of Welfare.

While our primary responsibility is to ensure the well-being of students, we also serve as a signpost to the broader university counselling services and other welfare resources available in Oxford. Additionally, JDs serve as liaisons between students and the college administration.

GTC’s diversity, particularly with a substantial black student population, makes the college a sanctuary within Oxford.

The college accommodates both domestic and international students, spanning various academic levels from short MSc courses to DPhils and Medicine programs.

This inclusivity sets GTC apart from the rest of the city, other colleges, and many academic departments.

Our mission as JDs is to create an inclusive and safe environment for students from all backgrounds.

The college’s staff and administrative leadership actively support our initiatives and often allocate budgets for events and activities that enhance student welfare.

My role as a JD allows me to engage in the planning and execution of these activities, significantly impacting the college’s culture positively.
“I have the opportunity to influence and shape the college's policies and protocols”.

Furthermore, the unwavering support I receive from my fellow staff members on the welfare team, regardless of my background as a black person, reinforces our shared commitment to the well-being and inclusivity of all students at GTC.

GTC continually strives to enhance the quality of student care and support. Staff members regularly undergo training to improve their welfare provision skills, including dealing with sensitive issues. Protocols for handling various concerns are in a state of continuous refinement. Even in my capacity as a JD, representing students -to some extent, black students- I have the opportunity to influence and shape the college's policies and protocols. I actively participate in the welfare committee, which convenes once a term to review and refine policies.

It is further deepening my understanding of the college's inner workings and allowing me to make valuable contributions. Additionally, the strength of our Junior Dean team is a cornerstone of our efforts at GTC. Working alongside Amy and Tash, we form a cohesive unit that synergizes effectively.

Our shared commitment to student welfare is unwavering, and we support each other in our roles. The camaraderie we share extends beyond our duties; we genuinely enjoy serving students together, pooling our skills and experiences to create a more enriching college environment for everyone.

Lastly, GTC's distinctive culture is a significant aspect of what makes it an outstanding place to live and study.

The porters' friendly demeanour creates a welcoming atmosphere, and students enjoy liberal access to college facilities and ample space for interaction and work. The college's commitment to investing in its students is evident, and the community exudes positivity and warmth. Being a Junior Dean at GTC is an incredible privilege, allowing me to be part of this unique culture and contribute to its vibrancy.

In conclusion, Green Templeton College's dedication to diversity, welfare, and fostering a supportive environment for all students makes it a standout college at Oxford University. As a Junior Dean, I am honoured to be part of this community, working to ensure the well-being and inclusivity of our diverse student body while actively shaping the college's policies and contributing to its unique culture.
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